

Dear Dr Cook

Thank you for your letter, regarding the ABC's recent coverage of how Australia is adapting to rapid population growth.

Your complaint has been investigated by Audience and Consumer Affairs, a unit which is separate to and independent of program making areas within the ABC. We have carefully considered your concerns and information provided by the content makers, reviewed the content and assessed it against the ABC's editorial standards for *accuracy* and *impartiality*.

The ABC has presented ongoing coverage of population/immigration growth and related issues, across the breadth of its television, radio and online platforms, on a newsworthy basis *over time*. The content that concerned you was not framed or intended as a debate about the pros and cons of existing immigration levels, or intended to question whether or not population growth could be avoided or slowed. As the title of the *Four Corners* report *Big Australia – Are we ready?* suggested, the coverage was focused on the newsworthy question - if Australia's population does grow as projected, based on the current rates of immigration, how should we plan and prepare for that growth?

The coverage sought to present an overview of how we got to this point and what the projections tell us about our future, with a particular focus on the question of whether we have a plan to deal with population growth on the scale at which it has been occurring.

The content did not seek to argue that the current rate of growth is unstoppable, or to in any way disparage arguments for lower growth. It acknowledged that all the current indications point to population growth continuing at, or around, its current rate. Given the lack of any political momentum toward reducing immigration rates, the newsworthy focus was on the ramifications for Australia of immigration continuing at current or similar levels. We are satisfied this particular editorial focus represents a matter of significant public interest worthy of examination, and that it presented a balance that follows the weight of evidence on this issue.

As the introduction to the *Four Corners* report noted, the population is growing fast and has grown by 400,000 in the last year alone, with the populations of Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane and Perth expanding by nearly three million extra people in the last 10 years. The broad impact of this rapid growth is already being keenly felt across Australia, so the program highlighted key areas where the country was feeling the strain and questioned how it might be managed over time.

Nevertheless, we are satisfied that relevant context was presented identifying the strong resistance in Australia to the current levels of growth, with repeated reference to the strain on infrastructure, the natural environment, education, health, housing, congestion, quality of life and so on throughout the coverage. The significant impact that rapid, ongoing population growth was having on Australia was made very clear to ABC Audiences.

Within this context, the program presented a broad range of relevant perspectives, including those who believe that significant growth is inevitable and should be embraced, and those strongly opposed who argue that such growth is unsustainable, including Bob Carr, Dick Smith and Tony Abbott. Of those who could be considered supporters of a larger population, we observe that Bernard Salt was critical of the current rate of population growth, while Innes Willox of the Australian Industry Group was sceptical of Australia's ability to plan for a larger population on current practices. The Q&A discussion that followed *Four Corners* presented a further range of views, including Bob Carr and Tim Flannery as well as members of the public posing questions to the Q&A panel. We are satisfied that no one perspective was unduly favoured over another, on the issue of how Australia is adapting to rapid population growth.

However, it is important to understand that *impartiality* does not require that every perspective receives equal time, or that every facet of every argument is presented. Impartial treatment of an issue or topic does not mean always opposing one view with another and there was no editorial requirement, within the context of this coverage, to present the details of every contested or contestable position or argument on the issue.

We cannot agree that the online articles *You decide Australia's population, we'll show you how it looks* and *'We decided not to have children': What you'd give up to help Australia's population problem* unduly favoured a particular point of view, or sought to belittle any particular point of view. Within the editorial context of examining what an expanding population may mean for Australia, *You decide Australia's population, we'll show you how it looks*, focused on just one element of the topic - Australia's changing population age structure as forecast in the Australian Bureau of Statistics Population Projections, and drew on the relevant expertise of Dr Tom Wilson of Charles Darwin University, Dr Dianne Rudd of Adelaide University and Andrew Howe of the Australian Bureau of Statistics. These experts represent a range of relevant, credible perspectives and their statements were clearly attributed as their professional views on the matter.

The introduction to *You decide Australia's population, we'll show you how it looks* made clear there are conflicting views on the matter, stating that "*Some say Australia should have stopped growing decades ago. Others point out Australia is a wealthy country with plenty of space to welcome more*" - and - "*Keep in mind: a growing population means more demand on resources. But it also means more people to produce goods and services, and to pay the taxes that fund government services.*" The introduction also disclosed that the chart was based on the latest projections from the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

'We decided not to have children': What you'd give up to help Australia's population problem noted the swelling population would impact people's lifestyles and asked what people may be willing to change to adapt. It was quite obviously presented as an unscientific vox pop and we cannot agree that it promoted any particular view. The article was consistent with the editorial focus on how Australia was adapting to rapid population growth.

These online articles represent one aspect of ABC News online's ongoing coverage of population/immigration related issues, published on a newsworthy basis *over time*, in keeping with the Corporation's editorial standards for impartiality –

4.2 Present a diversity of perspectives so that, *over time*, no significant strand of thought or belief within the community is knowingly excluded or disproportionately represented.

4.5 Do not unduly favour one perspective over another.

Here are some examples of ABC News online's ongoing coverage that present a critical focus of immigration/population growth on the Australian economy -

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-01-19/high-immigration-masks-australian-economic-decline/8193628>
<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-12-22/wages-stall-as-population-soars/9281552>

The *Life Matters* segment presented talkback with Peter McDonald, Head of Demography and Ageing at the University of Melbourne and Bronwen Clark from the National Growth Areas Alliance, an advocacy group for the fastest growing suburbs across Australia. The program presented a range of perspectives from listeners, none of which were unduly favoured over another. The segment was not presented as a pro or con debate on population growth, but sought to discuss people's views on how Australia should plan and prepare for the projected growth. We note that during the talkback callers identified their concerns, including planning for infrastructure like schools, hospitals and roads. Other callers expressed concerns in regards to the environment, food production and there were some comments about the need to reduce immigration numbers and to reduce the size of families. The perspectives presented on the program were just a portion of the broad range of perspectives presented by the ABC on this issue across the week, and on a newsworthy basis *over time*.

Talkfest was also not presented as a for or against debate, but sought to present a range of perspectives from recent panel discussions on the issue, none of which were unduly favoured over another. We are satisfied that Liz Allen represented a relevant perspective on the issue, given she continues to argue for the development of a coherent population policy and that Australia needs good government policy to manage demographic shifts. Her views were clearly attributed as her own perspective and were just one of a range of perspectives presented by Radio National on the matter. We are satisfied that no one perspective was unduly favoured over any other in the broadcast.

The Q&A panel does not set out to have a debate between competing sides, but to present a range of views that will provoke discussion. In this broadcast the intention was to bring some well-known and articulate Australians together to discuss an important topic, not to provide advocacy for a particular side. We observe panel members who agreed at one point disagreed elsewhere, and brought different perspectives to the issue. No 'side' won or lost and that is not the way Q&A works. All panellists were afforded ample opportunities to make their points and, as explained above, impartiality does not require that every perspective receives equal time.

Regarding the use of video questions, Q&A uses them regularly but not in every program. The program has explained that it is often a question of quality, or relevance. Q&A advise there was a question from a studio audience member on the topic of carrying capacity of the environment which was short-listed on the night, but it ended up being dropped (along with three other short-listed questions) because they ran out of time. Q&A expected Tim Flannery to mention sustainability while answering other questions on population but he chose not to.

Q&A staff frequently edit questions, usually for length, sometimes to remove offensive material, sometimes to make a question more direct and to the point so it is about one thing, not several. This is common editorial practice for a program with a defined time limit wishing to cover as much material as possible. Q&A has provided the following statement in response to your concern –

Such edits are always discussed with the questioner and the questioner's approval is sought. This often happens by telephone during the afternoon, if not it happens when the audience member arrives at the studio. Most audience members are happy with this. Those who are not happy are given an opportunity to rework their original question. If they insist on asking their original question, they may be removed from the short list. On the whole audience members are truthful and honourable when a question has been amended, and grateful for the opportunity to ask it. In this case the question had a long preamble that mentioned issues which we knew would be raised several times throughout the program, so we cut it back. It was the first question of the night and we wanted it to be direct but still reflect the strongly held views of the questioner. It makes no sense to suggest we were trying to remove references to the negative aspects of population growth. Such references were everywhere throughout the show.

We are satisfied that this particular editorial focus on identifying to population growth presented a balance that follows the weight of evidence on that issue, and that it is a highly newsworthy matter of significant public interest worthy of examination and discussion. While the content did identify that there is a debate over whether the current rates of immigration are too high, and presented the perspectives of high profile public figures arguing against it, there was no editorial requirement within this context for the ABC to present the issue as a debate or to set out all the conflicting arguments on population growth and examine the merits of every contestable position.

We cannot agree that the coverage was pro-growth or in any way disparaged arguments for lower growth, given the constant references in all of the content to the negative aspects of rapid population growth that will significantly impact almost every area of Australian life.

Please be assured that your personal expectations on how this issue should have been framed and presented are noted, as are the issues you believe should have been more closely examined as part of this coverage by the ABC. It is obviously not possible to cover every aspect of such a complex matter within the one program or report. The ABC will continue to report on various aspects of this complex issue, on a newsworthy basis *over time*.

The ABC Code of Practice and Editorial Policies are available online at the attached link;
<http://about.abc.net.au/reports-publications/code-of-practice/>.

Should you be dissatisfied with this response to your complaint, you may be able to pursue your concerns regarding *Four Corners*, Q&A, *TalkFest* and *Life Matters* with the Australian Communications and Media Authority <http://www.acma.gov.au>

Yours sincerely

Kieran Doyle
Audience and Consumer Affairs

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